THE BOOK REPORT

True Spy Story Stranger Than Fiction

BY ROBERT KIRSCH
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If Greville Wynne's CONTACT ON GORKY STREET (Atheneum: $4.95; illustrated) were a novel, it would rank high among the best of espionage fiction. But it isn't. This is an account, simply and compellingly written, of one of the most important incidents in the history of the cold war.

It surpasses fiction not only because of the action and adventure (though these are intriguing enough) but because of two other important elements: the character of the two men involved, and the questions it raises of loyalty and patriotism.

Greville Wynne, a British businessman recently released from a Russian prison, can only now reveal the story behind his arrest and conviction for espionage. He had to be certain that the Russian officer, Col. Oleg Penkovsky, who was his source of information, was no longer alive and at the mercy of his Soviet captors. He is believed to have taken his own life.

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We now know the importance of the information Penkovsky fed to the western powers, and the effect this had on the missile confrontation over Cuba. This was made clear long before the book was published. It was Penkovsky's information that helped to make President Kennedy's stand on Cuba less of a calculated risk than it appeared at the time.

But Wynne is not concerned with this. Others will have to analyze that aspect of it. Here he relates the story in personal terms, without heroics. Wynne's job was to keep the pipeline open. It was Penkovsky who was the crucial figure: a colonel in the Red Army, high in the ranks of the Communist Party and in the Soviet military intelligence service.

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Wynne was indeed a businesmen, but he was no amateur accidentally recruited. He was trained and placed specifically to contact Penkovsky, though for at least five years he did not know the identity of the man he was to recruit. Only after they met did a friendship grow, a mutual respect so deep, that when Penkovsky came to London, met the highest intelligence officials from England and the United States, he would not even begin to talk until Wynne was present. In an activity so filled with suspicion and peril, friendship was ultimately the key.

Penkovsky was not for sale; he did not seek money for his information. He was a Russian who had a deep affection for his country. His decision to serve the West came out of a developing repugnance for the regime which had become oppressive and tyrannical. Again, his personal position was not the issue. He could have lived out his life with prestige and perquisites available to him. But he felt the pangs of conscience.

It was not an easy decision.

Nor did he make the first step. The beginning of this story is one which would strain belief in a novel. In 1955, Penkovsky was assistant military attache in Ankara, a senior assistant in the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Red Army, the G.R.U. There, a British agent noticed and reported Penkovsky's habit of slipping away by himself for a drink, sitting pensively in an Ankara cafe.

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It was little enough to go on. "It might mean nothing. A man was certainly free to have a drink alone, though a Soviet officer was less free than most. But why so often? And why no companion? Penkovsky was known to have a roving eye, so why no girl? Why the faraway expression? Might it, could it not, suggest a restlessness? A dissatisfaction? An intention perhaps?"

A decision was taken on this tiny piece of information. British intelligence decided to place an agent with no other function than to be in a position to meet Penkovsky at the right place, at the right time—if such a meeting ever could eventuate. Wynne was chosen. His business activities behind the Iron Curtain were a cover. But he was carefully instructed not to make the slightest espionage move with anyone but Penkovsky. Wynne had all the qualifications.

Ironically, the Russians made an attempt to recruit Wynne as an agent for them. But he remained outside any double agent role. His target was Penkovsky. And he had his chance in meetings with the Scientific Research Committee, a Soviet government agency with offices on Gorky Street. Penkovsky was an important member of the committee.

Wynne tells the story of the contact, the slow building of trust, the passing of information, his arrest, his confrontation with Penkovsky in Lubianka Prison (where Penkovsky, though broken physically and mentally by his interrogators, managed to make a prearranged signal to alert Wynne that he hadn't told all), the Kafkaesque trial, the release. It is a tale which gives the reader access to the subterranean world of espionage, in human terms, a vivid and important work.